

Pentecost 23

November 8, 2020

Prepared for the Long Run

Matthew 25:1-13

A Catholic priest and a Presbyterian minister walked into a restaurant and sat down to celebrate the minister's 40th birthday. In the course of their dinner, the priest challenged his friend to run the Marine Corps Marathon. Sounds like a joke, doesn't it? That's what the Presbyterian minister thought.

But the priest wasn't kidding. Problem was, the minister had no experience as a runner, and the prospect of 26.2 miles was daunting. But he knew he needed a midlife challenge as he entered his 40s. Since the priest had already run several marathons, he gave his friend some tips and turned him loose.

The first time he hit the road, the minister ran for three minutes and had to stop, gasping for breath. But after walking for seven minutes, he was able to run for another three, and then he walked another seven and ran three. Over several weeks, his running increased and his walking decreased until he could run for an hour. And then he ran two hours. "If you can run two hours, you can run four hours," the priest told him. "If you can run four hours, you can do a marathon."

He was right. Six months after beginning his training, the minister finished the Marine Corps Marathon in four hours and 12 minutes. He felt as if he'd been through boot camp, but his exhausted elation at the finish line made the pain worthwhile.¹

Jesus tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids as an illustration of what the kingdom of heaven will be like.

All ten are dressed for the wedding and ready to go, like runners in expensive shoes and high-tech running duds at the start of the Marine Corps Marathon. But there is a subtle division in the group: Five are wise and five are foolish.

So, what makes for this distinction? It is not that the first five aced their SATs and the second group did not. Nor is it that five made smarter choices about shoes and clothing for the event. No, the five wise bridesmaids have enough oil to handle a delay in the arrival of the bridegroom, while the five foolish ones have only enough oil for the moment. The first five are prepared for the long run.

When the bridesmaids gather for the wedding, they all assume that the event will be like a sprint. But it turns into a marathon. The bridegroom is delayed and they all become weary, feeling like runners approaching Heartbreak Hill on the Boston Marathon.

At midnight, there is a shout: “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” After hours and hours on the course, the finish line is suddenly within sight. All of the bridesmaids trim their lamps, but the foolish ones discover quickly that they are out of oil. They have not prepared themselves properly for this final push, and they find themselves close to running out of gas.

Marathoners know that proper training is essential to the completion of a race. Running several days a week is the foundation of any training program, and as marathon day approaches, at least one of these weekly runs needs to get longer — six miles, then eight, then 10, 12, 14, 16, 18 and even 20. The only way to have enough “oil” is to train the body to endure a long run.

The foolish bridesmaids say to the wise ones, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” And the wise ones say, “No!” — of course. A runner cannot share her training with another person; everyone has to prepare herself or himself. The foolish bridesmaids drop out to purchase some oil from a dealer, and while they are away, the bridegroom appears and the doors to the wedding are barred to any latecomers. Jesus concludes with the advice, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

So, what is this oil that the foolish bridesmaids have not adequately prepared? It’s not actually olive oil, nor is it a rigorous physical training program. Instead, in the Jewish tradition of Jesus’ time, oil is a symbol for good deeds.

New Testament professor M. Eugene Boring says that oil represents “deeds of love and mercy in obedience to the Great Commandment” — feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison.²

Such deeds are not a quick fix, a sprint of good works. Instead, they require the marathon mentality. Seven years after his first Marine Corps Marathon, that 40-something Presbyterian minister decided to run it again — but this time as part of a team of 50 runners raising money for 25:40, an organization helping to fight AIDS in South Africa. The group gets its name from Matthew 25:40, in which Jesus says: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

As the minister prepared for the marathon, he thought of Lithemba, a five-year-old South African boy with AIDS. His fundraising would support a clinic that treated Lithemba and paid the salary of AIDS monitors — native South Africans trained in HIV/AIDS care and prevention.

When he felt exhausted at the halfway mark, the minister thought of the weariness brought on by a life-threatening disease. When he struggled to make it to his next water stop, he wondered what it would be like to face real thirst: In rural South Africa, millions of people lack clean drinking water.

That Presbyterian minister was certainly glad that he had taken on the discipline of marathon running. But better than suffering for himself was the experience of doing something to ease the anguish of others. And that is what Jesus is teaching us in the parable of the ten bridesmaids: We prepare for the kingdom of heaven by performing deeds of love and mercy again and again and again. We need to be prepared for the long run.

Many of us contribute canned food to help the hungry through annual drives, set aside a day a year to work on the homes of needy neighbors or devote a week of vacation to short-term mission projects. This is kingdom work, for sure, with benefits to both givers and recipients.

But being a visitor to prisoners for a day is not as demanding as being a visitor year after year, when inmates make slow progress or even bounce back into jail after a short time in the outside world. “Being merciful for an evening can be pleasant,” says commentator Eugene Boring; “being merciful for a lifetime, when the groom is delayed, requires preparedness.”³

Jesus challenges us to prepare for the kingdom through a regular discipline of loving and merciful actions. We need to train for the kingdom of heaven as a runner prepares for a marathon, running 10, 12 and even 20 miles. When the kingdom arrives, we want to be ready, well prepared by the good efforts we have made in the world.

The good news is that this disciplined effort is not as exhausting as it sounds. Marathon training is a kind of meditation — an opportunity to think, dream, pray and solve problems. Exercise cuts through the clutter of life and gives runners the gift of simplicity for a few hours each week. In a world full of phone calls, emails, meetings and paperwork, marathon training calms the spirit by offering a sharp focus on the path that lies ahead.

Acts of love and mercy can cut through the clutter of life as well. They remind us of the elegant simplicity of the words of Jesus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁴ And they illustrate the truth of the letter of James: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”⁵ Exercising our Christian muscles again and again can make us more loving, caring and faithful, with a sharper focus on the path to the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus invites us to join him in a marathon, not a sprint. He tells us to keep our lamps full of the oil of love and mercy so that we’ll be burning brightly when the kingdom appears. The finish line is out there, and we can cross it, but only if we are prepared for the long run.

1) Henry G. Brinton, “Running for Good,” *Washingtonian*, November 2007,

2) M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*

(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 450. 3) *Ibid.*, 451. 4) Matthew 22:39. 5) James

1:27.